



U.S. Cellular Refunds Wisconsin Consumers for Questionable Third-Party Charges

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U.S. Cellular recently refunded \$65,784.15 to Wisconsin consumers who were billed for unwanted text messaging services by Silicon Investments Group, Inc., a third-party vendor. The case, involving more than 6,500 transactions, was mediated by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

U.S. Cellular also suspended all future billing of Wisconsin consumers by Silicon Investments Group, Inc. (Silicon Investments) and suspended the company from running "Premium Text Messaging services" on its network. The refunds from U.S. Cellular were listed on consumers' March or April 2012 bills.

"We appreciate the company's cooperation with our mediation efforts," said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. "U.S. Cellular took steps to assist Wisconsin consumers who were billed for inappropriate and unauthorized phone services by a third-party company."

One Wisconsin consumer who filed a complaint with the Bureau of Consumer Protection received a series of unsolicited text messages from Silicon Investments advertising an entertainment message service called "Gossiptexts." He received three messages from the company within two minutes on January 31st – the first was an opt-in message for the service, the second confirmed his participation in the program and the third was a text about the Super Bowl half-time show.

Despite ignoring the texts and taking no action to approve his inclusion in the program, he was charged \$9.99 on his next monthly bill. According to U.S. Cellular, the guidelines from the Mobile Marketing Association would require that he take active steps such as entering a confirmation code on a separate website in order to approve this service on his phone.

Telecommunications companies allow third-party vendors to charge consumers on their monthly bills for services and applications they purchase for their phones. But through a process referred to as "cramming," illegitimate third-party groups will charge false fees or will bill for services the consumer never knowingly purchased. Because monthly phone bills can be difficult to navigate, these companies expect that a large percentage of consumers will never notice that the fees are tacked to the accounts.

Consumer Protection provides the following tips to help consumers avoid falling victim to cramming:

- Review your monthly bills closely, looking for questionable or unauthorized charges.
- Dispute any unauthorized charges with the third-party vendor through their contact number listed on the bill.
- If this gets you nowhere, take your issue directly to the cell service provider.

For more information or to file a consumer complaint, visit the Bureau of Consumer Protection on the web at datcp.wisconsin.gov or contact us via e-mail at datcp hotline@wi.gov or by phone at 1-800-422-7128.

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